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Black Heritage Stamp Series: James Weldon Johnson

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Issue Date: February 2, 1988

First Day City: Nashville, Tennessee

Designer: Thomas Blackshear
Novato, California

Art Director: Jerry Pinkney, Citizens'
Stamp Advisory Committee

Typographer: Bradbury Thompson, Design
Coordinator, Citizens'
Stamp Advisory Committee

**Postal Service
Manager:** Jack Williams, Program Manager
for Philatelic Design

Modeler: Richard Sennett, American
Bank Note Company (ABN)

Printing Process: Gravure (ABN)

Colors: Magenta, yellow, cyan, black
and line blue

Image Area: .84 x 1.41 inches or
21.3 x 35.8 millimeters

Plate Numbers: Five single digits
(preceded by the letter "A")

Stamps per Pane: 50

Marginal

Markings: ©U.S. Postal Service 1987
Use Correct ZIP Code®

James Weldon Johnson Commemorative Stamp

A 22-cent commemorative stamp honoring James Weldon Johnson was issued February 2, in Nashville, Tennessee. The dedication ceremony was held in the Fisk Memorial Chapel on the campus of Fisk University.

Thomas Blackshear of Novato, California, created the design based on photographs in the James Weldon Johnson Collection of The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. It is his second stamp, having also designed the 1987 Black Heritage Series stamp honoring Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable, a pioneer credited as the founder of Chicago.

In keeping with the design concept of most other stamps in this series, the portrait is combined with another element reflecting a significant aspect of his life. Overlaying the bottom of the image in black is the title line, "Lift ev-'ry voice and sing," from the song often referred to as the "Negro National Anthem." The words were written by James W. Johnson, with his composer brother, John Rosamond, providing the music.

The musical team was split when James moved into government service, being appointed as U.S. Consul to Venezuela (1906) and later to Nicaragua (1909-12). And, for nearly 15 years (1915-30), he worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. As the group's long-time Secretary, he promoted social, political and economic equality.

In addition, he also was a writer whose work reflected the racial climate of the day. Primarily known for poetry, perhaps his best known book, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), has been praised for its analysis of major race problems, a study more extensive than any other book of the early 20th century.

In 1938, James Weldon Johnson was killed in an automobile collision with a train near his summer home in Dark Harbor, Maine.



FIRST DAY OF ISSUE



AMERICAN COMMEMORATIVES

James Weldon Johnson



In his 1933 autobiography, James Weldon Johnson wrote, "...it is in the nature of a truism to say that this country can actually have no more democracy than it accords and guarantees to the humblest and weakest citizen." Democracy, and the responsibility and opportunity it represented, were important issues to Johnson, a poet, educator and statesman whose efforts furthered the cause of civil liberties for all Americans.

Born in Jacksonville, Florida, on June 17, 1871, Johnson is recognized as one of the most influential advocates of black culture during the early years of the 20th century. After graduating from Atlanta University, he served as a high school principal while spending his nights studying law. In 1887 he became the first black to be admitted to the Florida bar. A skilled writer, Johnson joined his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, in New York, where they wrote and composed popular vaudeville songs.

While in New York, Johnson became interested in government, and in 1906, Theodore Roosevelt named him consul to Venezuela. Johnson served for three years, then held a similar post in Nicaragua until 1912. Later, he became executive secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Throughout this time, Johnson continued to study and write. In 1922, he compiled the landmark anthology, *Book of American Negro Poetry*, one of the first serious studies of black culture in America. His work became widely known, and soon he was recognized as a leading figure in the growing civil rights movement. His hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, composed with his brother, served as an anthem to people young and old. In schools and churches across the nation,

Johnson's lyrics could be heard:

*"Lift every voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty..."*

Johnson died on June 26, 1938. This commemorative stamp, the 11th in the Black Heritage Series, was designed by Thomas Blackshear of Novato, California. It was issued February 2, 1988, in Nashville, Tennessee.



A 11111

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JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) was a distinguished poet, diplomat, and anthologist of black history. His work advanced the cause of black Americans, and helped pave the way for the civil rights movement that began in the 1950s.

A native of Jacksonville, Florida, Johnson received his early education and musical training from his schoolteacher mother. He graduated from Atlanta University in 1894 and earned a master's degree ten years later. In the interim, he founded and served as principal of one of the first black high schools in Florida. At the same time, he read law and became one of the first blacks admitted to the Florida bar.

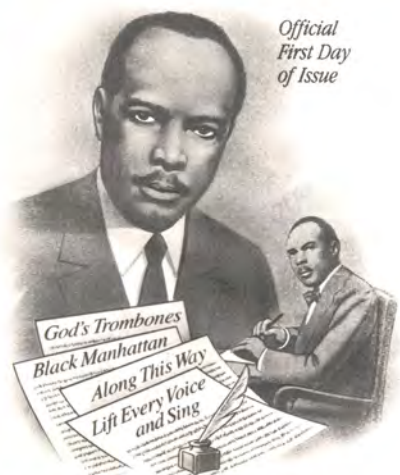
Johnson also wrote songs with his brother and, in 1901, the two set out for New York. Among their best known works was "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which was sung as a national anthem of the black civil rights struggle. The brothers collaborated on more than 200 songs for the Broadway theater, and also performed as a song and dance act.

Johnson's career took a surprise turn in 1906, when President Theodore Roosevelt appointed him to the post of U.S.

consul in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. His skill as a diplomat then led to a more sensitive assignment in Corinto, Nicaragua, where he served from 1909 to 1914. His first novel, "Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," was published anonymously during this period. It was followed by a series of anthologies that contained perceptive assessments of black contributions to American culture. The best known of these was "God's Trombone."

From 1916 to 1930, most of Johnson's energy was committed to The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He focused attention on lynchings in the South and on discrimination against blacks in the polling places and courts. The last years of his life were spent teaching at Fisk and New York Universities.

Tom Blackshear of Novato, California designed the 22¢ U.S. stamp honoring James Weldon Johnson. It is part of the Black Heritage series which began in 1978. The First Day of Issue was February 2, 1988 at Nashville, Tennessee, site of Fisk University, where Johnson held his last teaching position.



Official
First Day
of Issue

James Weldon Johnson
American Author, Poet



BLACK HERITAGE SERIES - 1988



FIRST DAY OF ISSUE



*James Weldon Johnson
Black Heritage Series*



FIRST DAY OF ISSUE

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Thomas G Carpenter Library
Special Collections

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James Weldon Johnson

Black Heritage Series

First Day of Issue: *February 2, 1988*

First Day City: *Nashville, Tennessee,*
where Johnson was a professor
at Fisk University

Stamp Designer: *Thomas Blackshear*
Novato, California

The career of James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), who is honored on this U.S. stamp, was a remarkable kaleidoscope of education, show business, poetry, and public service. In each area, he made important contributions of lasting value. His greatest impact was felt in the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, where his earlier crusades for social, political, and economic equality inspired leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.

Johnson's career was marked by an overlapping of intellectual pursuits and creativity. After receiving his B.A. degree

in 1894, he went on to receive several postgraduate degrees and served as the principal of an all-black high school in Florida. He was still involved in education, as professor of creative literature at Fisk University and a guest lecturer at New York University, at the time of his death. In the intervening years, he collaborated with his brother in the writing of 200 songs for musical comedies, light operas, and vaudeville performances. Among their compositions was "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the unofficial national anthem of the civil rights movement.

Johnson entered public service in 1906, serving as U.S. Consul in Venezuela, and later in Nicaragua. From 1916 to 1930, he was active in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, promoting racial equality throughout the country. He chronicled the black experience in volumes of poetry and other books, including the critically acclaimed work *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.



JAMES WELDON JOHNSON



FIRST DAY OF ISSUE
FEBRUARY 2, 1988
NASHVILLE, TENN.



R.

Collins